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THE BRITISH IN PALESTINE AND THE AMERICANS IN LEBANON

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THE SIEGE MENTALITY IN BEIRUT: AN HISTORICAL ANALOGY BETWEEN THE BRITISH IN PALESTINE AND THE AMERICANS IN LEBANON¹

The problem confronting the U.S. Marines presently stationed in Lebanon is similar to the one which the British Army faced in Palestine more than thirty years ago. In 1947, British troops, like their later day Marine counterparts, were deployed in urban areas where they were subjected to hit-and-run attacks by a determined and anonymous (though not, as is the case in Lebanon, suicidal) adversary. The British attempted to prevent further assaults by withdrawing behind allegedly impregnable barbed-wire fortifications, under the erroneous belief that these security zones could be successfully defended. As events subsequently demonstrated, they were wrong. But, more importantly, it appears today that the Americans may be repeating some of the same mistakes made by the British back then. That is, in the aftermath of the bombing of the Marine headquarters at Beirut International Airport last month, the belief seems to exist in some political and military circles that more barbed wire, additional earthen barriers, and the lengthening of camp perimeters will prove sufficient to thwart any new assault by Muslim terrorists on the Marines.

During the 1940s, the British Army fought a war in Palestine against the Jewish underground. After enduring three years of relentless attacks on government offices, military installations, and police stations, it was decided, in February 1947, to establish a network of heavily fortified security zones throughout the country. The

¹This paper was originally submitted to and cited in the report of The Department of Defense Commission on the Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act (The Long Commission).

largest of these was in the center of downtown Jerusalem, where the Army literally took over part of the city's commercial district and then withdrew behind a maze of complex check-points, countless coils of barbed wire, and innumerable earthen barricades. Isolated behind this seemingly well-protected fortress, nicknamed "Bevingrad" in reference to both British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin and the Soviet defenses which had surrounded Stalingrad during the German offensive against the city in 1943, the British felt certain they were impervious to future assault. Less than three weeks after the construction of this fortress, however, its defenses were breached.

On March 1, 1947, the *Irgun Zvai Le'umi* ("National Military Organization"), a Jewish paramilitary organization commanded by former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, struck in the heart of "Bevingrad", attacking the British officers' club located in Goldschmidt House. While one team of *Irgun* men sited a Bren gun on the check-point guarding an entrance to the security zone, another team, under covering fire from the Bren gun, rammed the roadblock in a large truck. Having successfully entered the zone, the vehicle drove on to the club, where the attackers rushed the building and, firing their submachine guns in front of them, hurled satchel bombs into the structure before withdrawing. In the ensuing explosions, seventeen persons were killed and twenty-seven others wounded. The raiding party escaped unharmed.²

The reaction of the British, like that being proposed in Washington today, was simply to unravel still more coils of barbed wire, build still more earthen fortifications, and push the perimeter of their

²J. Bowyer Bell, *Terror Out of Zion*, (New York St. Martin's Press, 1977), p. 190 and David Niv, *Ma'Archot Ha-Irgun Ha-Zvai Ha-Le'umi* [*Battle For Freedom: The Irgun Zvai Le'umi*] (Tel Aviv, Klausner Institute, 1975), Vol. V, pp. 102-104.

encampments further outward. For a time this seemed to work, since there were no more assaults on either the "Bevingrad" complex or similarly reinforced security zones in other parts of the country. On September 29, 1947, however, the *Irgun* staged yet another dramatic attack on a supposedly secure British installation. In *Terror Out of Zion*, J. Bowyer Bell recounts that:

During the summer one of the innumerable Irgun spotters, always on the lookout for chinks in the British armor, noticed that the northern police headquarters on Kingsway in Haifa was protected by a high wire fence and sand-filled barrels, but that it might be possible to devise something to go over the fence and roll to the entrance of the building.³

After securing Begin's approval for the attack, the group's premier demolitions expert, Amihai Paglin (who had designed the bombs which had demolished the Government Secretariat and British Military Headquarters at Jerusalem's King David Hotel in July 1946) set about to find a means to penetrate the police station's defenses. His plan was to fill a length of a cement irrigation pipe with explosives, attach tires from a three-ton truck to each end, and then erect a launching platform on top of another truck. The correct height of the platform was determined by monitoring the traffic going into and coming out of the police station and then comparing the heights of the vehicles to that of the perimeter fence.

On the appointed day, an innocuous truck, ostensibly transporting a piece of heavy machinery covered by a tarp, drove alongside the fence surrounding the police station. At a predetermined spot, the "barrel bomb" was launched: It successfully jumped the fence, effortlessly bounded over the endless coils of barbed wire and earthen barricades

³Bell, *Terror Out of Zion*, p. 245.

leading towards the police station, and, before anyone knew what was happening, rolled up against the building, where it exploded. The police station was totally destroyed; ten persons were killed and another fifty-four were injured. Once again, the raiders escaped unharmed.*

As these two incidents demonstrate, the trite aphorism that "where there is a will, there is a way" can never be dismissed when dealing with a determined enemy--as the British tragically discovered in Palestine. The lesson today so far as the Marines are concerned is clear: Determined adversaries are likely to find a way to undermine the defenses of what may be regarded as even the most impregnable installation.

**Ibid.*, and Niv, *Irgun*, Vol. V, pp. 334-336.



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